

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 281 846

SP 028 817

AUTHOR Davis, E. Dale
TITLE Personal Procrastination and Lost Professional Opportunities and Growth.
PUB DATE [87]
NOTE 15p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Psychological Patterns; Secondary School Teachers; Stress Variables; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Behavior
IDENTIFIERS *Procrastination

ABSTRACT

A study determined if there were common psychological causes associated with teachers who considered themselves more-than-average procrastinators and who also felt that they were under personal and professional stress as a result of their work. Interviews were conducted with 44 secondary school teachers to elicit responses regarding educational background, professional work, career opportunities, and accomplishments. This information was used along with information obtained from a literature review to summarize reasons behind procrastination among teachers. It is concluded that procrastination can become such a pervasive way of life that an individual may accept it as normal behavior. Teachers must identify the factors or causes of their procrastination and strive toward overcoming the psychological bases. Procrastination causes mental conflict and confusion; putting off or avoiding one's professional opportunities and duties can only lead to a lack of success. Suggestions presented for eliminating procrastination include: dividing large tasks into smaller, manageable units; not spending an inordinate amount of time preparing; and working toward goals.

(CB)

* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *

ED281846

PERSONAL PROCRASTINATION AND LOST PROFESSIONAL
OPPORTUNITIES AND GROWTH

E. Dale Davis

SP028 817

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

- ☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- ☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

E. Davis

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

PERSONAL PROCRASTINATION AND LOST
PROFESSIONAL OPPORTUNITIES AND GROWTH

Faculty procrastination is a major cause of professional and organizational problems in secondary schools. It accounts for a plethora of unmet program goals and faculty disappointments. It results in decreased individual productivity, inefficiency and personal management.

Procrastination is to put off intentionally the doing of something that should be done now. With many persons it is habitual, resulting in many unkept conferences, late projects, uncompleted reports, low grades, disordered records and files, and unprepared lessons.

For a teacher or an administrator personal procrastination often produces worry, guilt, sleepless nights, depression and anxiety--just to mention a few of the emotional consequences. This author's experience, field research, and research of professional literature indicate that in serious cases of procrastination there is an unresolved psychological conflict which is triggered when key tasks are confronted. A professional person needs to understand and attempt to work out such an emotional conflict before one's avoidance reaction can be completely overcome.

The major purpose of this study was to determine if there were common psychological causes associated with teachers who

considered themselves more than average procrastinators and who also felt that they were under personal and professional stress as a result of their work.

Forty-four secondary school teachers were interviewed. The interviews ranged in length from 24 minutes to over an hour. Short questions designed to elicit responses dealing with each teacher's education, professional work, career opportunities and accomplishments were used in the interviews. Those studied had taught at least five years and understood why the study was being made. All were assured that no individual would or could be identified in or from the study. Twenty-six teachers were from the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex, nine were from the Raleigh-Durham area of North Carolina, and nine were from southern California. The interviews took place during the summer of 1986 and the 1986-87 academic year. Two experienced counselors and one psychologist helped the author with the interviews and the formulation of the conclusions. No interviews were conducted in schools or during the school day.

The study also involved an in-depth perusal of the literature pertaining to the procrastination of teachers. This included a computer search of the ERIC Data Base System, Psychological Abstracts and the Education Index. The discussion below attempts to summarize some of the most common psychological causes of procrastination discussed in relevant literature and the most often identifiable personal conflicts on the part of the forty-four teachers studied.

The reader should be aware of the fact that studies of persons in business, sales, graduate school, and middle management positions in secondary schools show similar findings. Most persons, like the author, have struggled with some or all of the psychological factors which contribute to inordinate procrastination.

Common Causes of Procrastination

I. One of the leading psychological causes of procrastination is confusion or a lack of mental organization. Such persons are often overwhelmed and confused with their work and their personal life. At times they appear to be unable to act purposefully or to deal effectively with their work or environment. They seem to be so emotionally paralyzed by work and duties that they cannot see a starting point or how to begin. Thus they resort to procrastination and worry which, of course, makes them more overwhelmed and confused.

A classic example was one of the first ten teachers interviewed for this study. David was and is a department head. He is well educated, intelligent, ambitious; but his procrastination keeps him buried under unfinished tasks and overly preoccupied with his teaching and administrative duties. He himself stated that he was overwhelmed, anxious and depressed. He recognized that he was fearful of his position; yet he felt he had the ability to handle it if he could only get organized and get "his

system working." He insisted that it was only recently that "uncompleted work" had been allowed to accumulate; however, his principal and members of his department knew that this situation had existed for several years.

David's case is not unusual, but it is psychologically painful because of the emotional paralysis that results from the confused mind set and the unaccomplished tasks that have resulted from procrastination. David's problem had become a vicious cycle.

Many teachers set themselves up for this problem because their perspective of their work and what they can reasonably accomplish in their situation is distorted by intentionally putting off things that must or should be done. It should be recognized, however that two major factors in a case like David's are often the inability to say no to others and an "inordinate" desire to please other people.

Literature dealing with procrastination acknowledges that some positions do demand too much of individuals. The point this writer is trying to make is that confusion and lack of organization can result in a self-inflicted type of procrastination. When this happens, the best way to break out of this cycle is to organize one's time and work into manageable units and do them one by one. Learning to work more efficiently is the best way to work oneself out of confusion and a state of being constantly overwhelmed mentally.

II. Another psychological conflict which results in damaging procrastination is resentment of authority and persons. This type of emotional factor builds rebellion and resistance. One sullenly comes to resent others who make "unreasonable requests" and "demands." This is especially true of superiors who are "ordering" you around and you have to do what they say.

Peggy Sue is a case in point. She was one of the first twenty interviewed. This "old" writer knew her as a student, advisee, and student teacher. She grew up in a very strict, conservative home. Her parents loved her and wanted the best for her, but she constantly criticized them and the teachers in the private school she had attended. Later she resented college officials and teachers. At the present time, her comments indicate she has a love-hate relationship with her students and their parents. "They are always so demanding," she stated several times. Her first principal was "a little man who acted like a dictator." Her present principal is "an unreasonable woman who likes to dream up busy work for teachers." When this author asked why she did not ask for a transfer, he was told: "It wouldn't do any good; they are all alike."

In Peggy Sue's case the same pattern and mind set that was present when she was an adolescent in her parents' home has emerged. As she freely talked about herself, her school, and work, it was evident that she was resentful and angry because she

felt she was victimized by the expectations, demands and deadlines of others. She was mentally and overtly striking back by procrastinating against the "system" and authorities in the school. Lessons were not properly prepared; reports were turned in late or at the final deadline; tests were given to aides to duplicate at the last minute; meetings were missed or arrived at after they had started; notices to parents were not sent; committee work was not complete, etc.

There are, unfortunately, many talented teachers and other professionals whose work and careers are compromised because they have not resolved many mental conflicts and attitudes with and toward authority figures. The literature brings out that persons can do many things to rebel indirectly against persons in authority by procrastinating.

Overcoming this type of procrastination involves at least two important actions. First, one should learn to manage interpersonal problems directly rather than through procrastination, or some other form of passive resistance. Many psychologists recommend assertive training for persons who need help in dealing effectively with problem situations where authority figures and self anger are concerned. A second thing an individual can do is to accept emotionally that he has entered into an agreement and signed a contract with a school to teach and perform other duties which are job related and for which he is to be paid. One should thus not think of oneself as a victim but rather a partner in a contractual arrangement.

III. A third major cause of procrastination is lack of self-confidence. Teachers and others sometimes consistently procrastinate when they are faced with new opportunities or challenges with which they have had little or no experience. They fear that they will not be very good at the new task or not be as highly competent in their first work or actions concerning the new situation. Often this feeling is called novice phobia in psychological literature. It can cause consistent procrastination especially when the professional involved has very low self confidence linked with a sense of perfectionism.

Several of the teachers interviewed spoke of their desire to do an excellent job but when asked about post advancement opportunities turned down, such as accepting scholarships, teaching honors classes, sponsoring activities, advancing on career ladders, they were very defensive. Two of the teachers studied were of great interest to this writer because they had been given several real opportunities that others knew they could master but which the two teachers had turned down. Their reasons or excuses for consistently refusing advancement opportunities seemed to involve low self-confidence and novice phobia. The new work would have required new skills, new experiences and new learning. Thus those two teachers, like many others, were willing to settle for limited careers and the status quo rather than putting themselves in a position where they might perform on an excellent or perfect level.

Procrastination that results from a lack of confidence can be a very distressing emotional burden, and it places one in a dilemma because it keeps alive a fantasy of competence or the inability to face realistically one's limitations or capabilities. To choose the procrastination alternative is to live with constant reminders of what you might have accomplished--but did not. Yet, if one without confidence thinks of trying for high accomplishments, again his fears cause him to procrastinate. He might find out that he is not as capable as he thought.

The best way to confront such mental stress and procrastination, according to the literature and common sense, is to test one's abilities, not just once, but several times. Set "reasonable" goals, assess your skills and abilities. Talk with "capable persons" or other professionals. Give up expectations that are unrealistic or objectives that clearly cannot be realized. Do not give up your dreams or career goals, however, because of needless procrastination. Face yourself and your abilities; then, the way to set realistic professional objectives for yourself will be much clearer.

Lack of self confidence can be seen as a self-defeating factor in many professionals. According to psychological literature, when such persons can be induced to attempt worthy and realistic goals, they usually perform very well. In addition, the literature clearly brings across the fact that

unless the victims of lack of confidence and novice phobia do attempt to achieve, they continue in their low self-confidence; and a pattern of inhibition and procrastination continue to prevent personal and professional growth.

In many areas most professional persons have been novices at one time or another. To be afraid of new tasks or to fear learning from one's mistakes as he progresses in his career may mean one has a sense of false pride. In other words, one is attempting to protect an image--an unreal image--of great confidence. Thus in such a case if the person does not do well, then his image is decreased even though it has been an unrealistic image all along. The key to improvement is to drop the unrealistic pretense. It will then not be necessary to spend energy trying to keep up a false front that will prevent greater achievement. The individual will also learn to be more flexible and less the victim of self-imposed procrastination.

IV. The avoidance reaction known as self-sabotage often leads to procrastination. Many professional teachers develop mixed emotions, attitudes, and self doubts about opportunities, challenges or changes that could occur if they were to accomplish a particular goal or objective. They then procrastinate and avoid the task or do nothing. They make sure they miss or put off opportunities for advancement. Often they later castigate themselves for their lack of action and are very verbal about their behavior with others.

Seldom, however, do they see that really they are sabotaging their own careers. They realize that promotions, new positions, more responsibilities or transfers to new classrooms or offices would bring about major changes and new roles. Psychologically, they are afraid of the new responsibilities; so they let the opportunities pass. They are often compulsive workers and ambitious people, but they will not act on their opportunities. Later such persons state that they felt constrained to stay where they were, that conditions were not just right, or some such excuse. By procrastinating at these crucial times, many teachers never have to make a decision until the opportunity is gone. By this time the issue is resolved and the personal dilemma has for the moment passed.

This type of self-sabotage is linked to fear of success which can take many personal forms. At times it is the individual's fear of the unknown associated with promotion and possible advancement that causes procrastination. Another person sabotages himself with insecurity and lack of confidence that result in resistance to the changes that could occur in career advancement. The procrastinating person sometimes fear that action associated with advancement will disrupt friendships or social relationships; so he avoids doing things necessary for professional advancement. Some of the teachers interviewed in this study indicated they did not want certain appointments because they would have to deal with present friends as their

subordinates if they should be promoted to higher positions. They were like some soldiers this writer has known who did not want to be officers even though they knew they had the experience and the ability.

Individuals who fight this dilemma sabotage career advancement by using procrastination when their ambition and their vision of the results of promotion collide. They do not make a decision until the deadlines or opportunities have gone. Then the decision has already been made by someone else. The personal status quo is preserved. Ambivalence has stopped any direct action. Self-sabotage through procrastination has worked again. It would be psychologically better for persons just to decide that they do not want or are not qualified for promotion rather than continually procrastinating. When individuals actually make decisions, they are exercising some mental control over their lives and also reducing negative feelings produced by lack of action, effort, and ambivalence.

V. A fifth major cause of procrastination is what the psychological literature calls the pleasure priority. This term refers to persons, in this case, teachers, who put fun, pleasure, or enjoyment ahead of ambition, professional growth, or self-sacrifice. When there must be a choice between an enjoyable experience, week-end, summer etc., and work toward advancement or long-term professional objective, these individuals will usually

choose enjoyment and fun with the weak verbal or mental promise to themselves that next time they will do whatever is necessary for advancement. But for the present they procrastinate. They do not study and set priorities.

Such professionals must also learn to make positive decisions for professional growth. They must choose to work for long-term goals and rewards without procrastinating. Future professional payoffs can come about for them only when pleasure and inertia are given a secondary role. This is the only way to learn the self-discipline to overcome procrastination caused by the pleasure priority, according to the literature reviewed.

Summary

Procrastination can become such a pervasive way of life or habit that an individual may accept it as normal behavior. This and many other studies show that procrastination can be very disruptive to professional goals and good mental health. An individual must identify the factor or cause of his procrastination and strive toward overcoming the psychological bases. The person must then arrange his work and life-style so that critical decisions and tasks are accomplished. Procrastination creates mental conflict and confusion. One can defeat procrastination and thus feel much better about one's self. Self esteem will be enhanced and a major barrier to professional success will have been overcome. Putting off or avoiding one's professional opportunities and duties can only lead to a lack of success.

The following additional recommendations on the basis of this study are made below:

1. Divide large tasks into manageable units or areas and do some of these first to get started. Do not let a major job overwhelm you. Progress--even small progress--builds psychological satisfaction and encourages one to continue.

2. Do not spend an inordinate amount of time getting ready and preparing. By this the author means it is better to go ahead and start than to procrastinate by trying to have the ideal situation and materials arranged and in order before any work is attempted. Concentrate, study the task, pick your time for crucial decisions to be made and work to be accomplished. Choose your starting point and move toward completion. Try to make your actions move you purposefully toward short and long range goals.

3. Work toward goals. People are goal oriented. When one achieves goals, there is satisfaction, psychological rewards, and success on which confidence can be realistically built.